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"Pop, pop, pop"

The Politicis of James Graham's Ink

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“Pop, pop, pop”: The Politics of James Graham’s *Ink*

Starting in 1969 with the takeover of the *Sun* by Rupert Murdoch, *Ink* deals with the distribution war between the *Mirror* (the newspaper of the working class) and the *Sun*, initiated by Murdoch and his pioneering editor Larry Lamb. The play is obviously relevant: it tries to explain the origins of where we are today and in particular the origins of the media cultures which seemed to be influential at the time of the EU referendum. Metropolitan and middle class audiences who voted Remain obviously see this play and conclude that it affords them a glimpse of where a revolution began. Of course the *Sun* argued Leave the EU while the *Mirror* urged voters to vote Remain. But the play is more interested in a putative *cultural* opposition which started to emerge in 1969, and the idea that when it came to the time of the vote several decades later, two media cultures were at work. On the one hand, a culture of information and analysis; on the other, one of out and out populism. The playwright goes so far as to suggest that the concept of user-generated content can be traced back to this time. “Isn’t that the real endpoint of the revolution?” asks Murdoch at one point. “When they’re producing their own content themselves?” (44).

The vote to leave the EU is constructed in much of today’s media as a working class rebellion, and a rebellion which was decidedly unenlightened. All kinds of news about the benightedness of working class Leave voters have been in circulation ever since. The obvious question is “In this play, dealing with the historic emergence of a less-politically informative popular newspaper in the U.K., to what extent is the playwright *fair* to the working classes?” If sections of U.K. society are experiencing a moral panic about the some of their fellow citizens, does the play educate them or does it fan the flames of that panic? My analysis will ultimately tend towards a negative assessment.

As I say, the play deals with the distribution war initiated by Murdoch and his editor Larry Lamb. The war is a war for the readers who are constructed as ‘the public,’ ‘the people’ and most importantly ‘the working class’. We learn – if we didn’t already know – that the *Mirror* had *laudable* content. It explained the budget to its working class readers in a serious manner; it taught them about classical music; as the play acknowledges, even John Pilger, the highly-respected Australian author and journalist, wrote for it. The *Sun* went with different material. In the play, the staff of the new *Sun* brainstorm and come up with the new content: smoking and drinking, sports

including boxing, gossip, the Royals, nightlife, television programmes, the weather, famous people, astrology, free things, winning, and sex. And of course later on soft-porn is added to the mix in the form of the well-known “page-3”, a development dealt with towards the end of the play

Cudlipp: It's – a great responsibility. Having the ear of the working classes –

Lamb: Oh Hugh, it's bloody chip-wrapping, end of the day. / 'responsibility' –

Cudlipp: Yours maybe – yes, you can scoff, but I've – we've worked hard to change things here, why? Because I happen to care about the bettering of people's lives, from the place I come from, you come from. To politically enable the next you, or me, all of us, with tools to forge our own collective destiny. / Is that such a –

Lamb: Sorry, our destiny, or your version of it? What about – yes collective, fine, but what about / individual people with individual –

The philosophies of the different papers are explained in *Ink*, as well. The *Mirror* is a paper of the working classes, and it is all about informing and educating its working class readers. Unsurprisingly, it is also associated with collectivism in the play. “To politically enable the next you, or me, all of us, with tools to forge our own collective destiny”, Cudlipp, editor of the *Mail*, rasps at Lamb. The *Sun*, as Murdoch in the play explains, is simply a newspaper run as a business, pure and simple. But what he and Lamb also argue is that the marketplace compels them to produce a newspaper which is a perfect match for the taste of ordinary working people. They give the public what they want, not what is good for them, and they *know* what the public want. Unsurprisingly, the language of individualism supplants that of collectivism when the vision is explained.

What the play sets up, then, is a very stark opposition between traditional informative journalism, connected to the working class, and on the other, a newspaper being run entirely like a business, which emphasizes fun and enjoyment at the expense of facts and analysis.

Lamb: ... Do you really sit there listening to all that, Hugh, or do you just feel like you should?

Cudlipp: Oh bugger off. Singing is the weapon of the Welsh working classes.

Lamb: There is actually a thing called pop music, now, it's been all the rage, for like, a decade, it's actually quite good. Stands for 'popular' – think of it like the popping of champagne corks, only it's for everyone, pop, pop, pop.

The play wouldn't have fooled anybody if it had simply vaunted the merits of the *Daily Mirror* of that time and damned *The Sun*. The play is more subtle than that, and this partly explains why it has earned plaudits from most critics. It's revealing to reflect on the fairness of the play. On one level, the out-of-touchness of the *Mirror* is flagged up. All kinds of contemporary phenomena are ignored by the paper, the critique says. The *Mail* didn't acknowledge the existence of the television, seeing it as a rival. It didn't talk about sex – something the audience no doubt finds especially ironic given that the play starts in the so-called erotic year. Nor does it talk about popular music. Lamb taunts Cudlipp about this in one scene in the play.

Brian: (*looking around him, aware of listening ears*) I happen to believe, Mr Lamb, that the *Mirror* is the crown jewel of Fleet Street, and a bastion of journalistic –

Lamb: Cut the shit, no one's listening, and you know full well how stuck up its arse it's become, Jesus.

Brian: Hugh Cudlipp's not stuck up. He's Welsh.

Lamb: You can be posh and Welsh, Bri.

Brian: No you can't, name one.

Lamb: ... Prince of Wales.

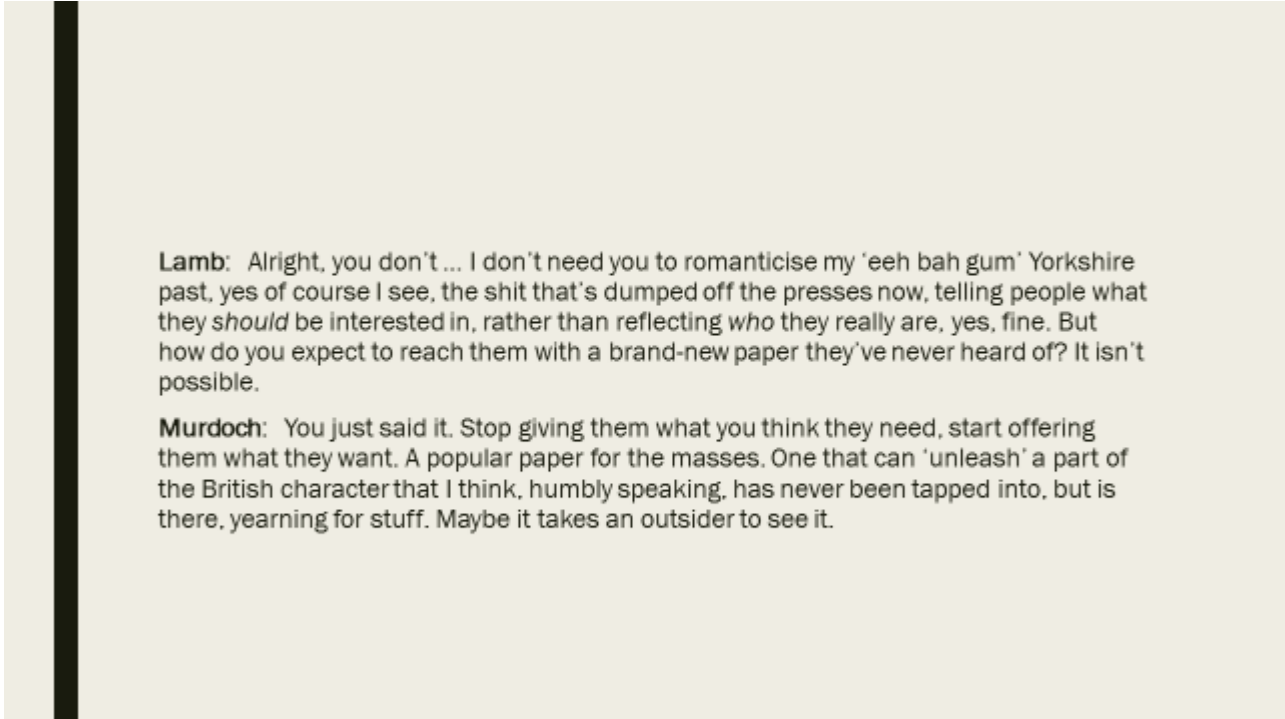
Importantly, the play flags an awareness of the class politics suggested by these tensions. When it comes to media content, one perennial danger is that the middle class selects “worthwhile” content for the working class. These politics may even be inscribed in the very notion of the “Reithian” in U.K. broadcasting. In the play, Murdoch alludes to the fact that it is impossible to succeed in Fleet Street if you didn’t go to Oxford or Cambridge. More importantly, the social class of Cudlipp, advocate of the paternalistic approach, is questioned. As we’ve seen, Cudlipp himself speaks of working class communities as where he *comes* from but not where he is now. Lamb suggests that Cudlipp is a champagne socialist now. And Cudlipp, in Lamb’s estimation, is posh – even if he is Welsh. Whatever the exact nature of the class identity of the *Mirror*, what we have in the play is a sense that, whether or not it had become a *bona fide* middle class instrument, the *Mirror* offered its working class readers exactly what a left-leaning middle-class demographic wanted them to have.

The play doesn’t suggest approval of Lamb’s *The Sun*, but it goes some way towards suggesting it was partly the result of the excessively aspirational nature of the *Mirror*. *Of course* someone dreamed up a tabloid like *The Sun*, we say to ourselves. In relation to a newspaper which was so anti-populist, something different was bound to appear. It could have been a paper genuinely rooted in the working class, characterized by a clearer account of working class taste, but in the end,

we got something else. Crucially, we have a sense that the blame for later developments lies at the door not just of Murdoch but also the *Mirror*, owing to its class meliorism.

The middle class, metropolitan theatre-goers leave the theatre, with a reinforced sense of how bad a newspaper like the *Sun* is and a new and improved understanding of the origins of “information and facts”-lite media: an understanding of how such media was initially the product of an overly paternalistic attitude to the working class on the part of the *Mirror* and perhaps the larger media world of that time more generally.

So the playwright avoids certain types of simplistic narrative. But are the politics of the play sound? The analysis sounds sophisticated, but let's dig deeper, relying on Richard Hoggart at times for guidance.



Lamb: Alright, you don't ... I don't need you to romanticise my 'eeh bah gum' Yorkshire past, yes of course I see, the shit that's dumped off the presses now, telling people what they *should* be interested in, rather than reflecting *who* they really are, yes, fine. But how do you expect to reach them with a brand-new paper they've never heard of? It isn't possible.

Murdoch: You just said it. Stop giving them what you think they need, start offering them what they want. A popular paper for the masses. One that can 'unleash' a part of the British character that I think, humbly speaking, has never been tapped into, but is there, yearning for stuff. Maybe it takes an outsider to see it.

When critiquing a paper like the *Sun*, it's obviously of the utmost importance that we don't make value judgements about the readers themselves. Perhaps the play avoids that to a significant extent. But there may be some failings.

It's important to acknowledge that readers took an ironical attitude to the *Sun*, and the play exhibits an awareness of that but, there is little awareness of the fact that readers, choosing between the *Sun* and the *Mirror*, as they did, would, for information about the political situation and analysis, turn to other news sources as well. In one passage in *The Way We Live Now*, Hoggart

recalls the time when a market research group, out to elicit a negative view of the BBC licence fee, were surprised to hear that working class residents of a Midlands suburb, most of whom read the *Sun*, turned to the broadcast media for political information. The stark opposition which I outlined at the very start, between media which informs and media which doesn't is a false opposition if the focus is what working class people actually absorbed. But there is no sense of this crucial point in the play.

And no doubt the play should have distinguished between how the taste of the working class is constructed by Murdoch and Lamb, and what it was actually like. Hoggart observes "Rupert Murdoch may not have the leather-bound taste of earlier press barons but neither has he those of his readers" (204). More importantly, Hoggart argues that "To think the *Sun* represents the common norms of English working class life is like assuming that low-budget urban violence American films represent life in the towns of the Midwest" (99). There is perhaps insufficient attention to this issue in the play, which means that there is little resistance in it to the conclusion that Murdoch and Lamb had a clairvoyant understanding of the taste of working class people. This is a historical play relying on all kinds of facts of British life at the time, including what different personalities said at different times. What this means is that there is nothing stopping the playwright from incorporating a historic and more accurate account of working class taste. At the time, the dominant philosophy of Labour politicians was one which combined high levels of public expenditure with socially-liberal legislation, collectivism with individualism, and a fairer picture of working class life emerges in some of their public pronouncements, those of Anthony Crosland being a case in point. Perhaps a clear account of that taste could fairly be considered a *sine qua non* in such a play.

The danger, then, is that play fails to quell moral panic about the working class and actually sanctions a certain amount of class suspicion.

By way of a last point, a more sympathetic contemporary view of the condition of the working classes could have been suggested in the play. The contemporary reverberation of the play is the populist vote to leave the EU. A sense that, in the stock phrase, "the peasants are revolting" is a common trope today. However, another narrative says the working classes have been the subject of social authoritarianism for the past few decades, and that far from it being a golden age of popular power, the working classes are being more and more aggressively micro-managed by society at large. The origins of *this* development are in the late eighties. Once the miners had been defeated, as Larry Elliott explains, the micro-managing got started in earnest. That period, argues Elliott, saw the beginning of "social engineering projects aimed squarely at the traditional working

class, whether assaults on diet or lack of exercise or attempts to change their ‘attitudes’” (108). And as Hoggart puts it in his book about Europe, borrowing Jane Austen’s phrasing, this period saw the rise of laws designed to “screw the citizens into virtue”.

This might seem fastidious but it is important. The myth of the working class reader who gets his or her news from the *Sun* and nowhere else, and has his or her taste accurately reflected in the paper is a dangerous myth. As is the notion that today the shoe is on the other foot. A better play might have guided the theatre-goers away from these myths. A better play might have done justice to working class tastes and stressed the fact that they do in large numbers access facts and analysis through other kinds of media. On that basis, a sequel could have told the tale of how the working class has been subjected to aggressive social engineering since the mid-eighties too. Who knows? Plays like those could succeed in encouraging the metropolitan middle class to alter their rather damning assessment of the social class that voted quite overwhelmingly in favour of Brexit.